

The Woman With the Red Coat

By Marina González Velasco

The Saint Clarice Cafe is a deserted cafe, hidden from the main road; only someone who has been here before would know how to find it.

Every day is the same routine. I clock in, clean the kitchen, deal with an unfortunate number of hungry people who can't be bothered to say "please" and "thank you," and then I go home. Every day is the same day.

That was until her. The woman with the red coat.

Every day, at the same time for the last few months, she has come in. She sits down in the same booth, at the far corner, the one hidden in the shadows and away from the tall glass windows.

She orders a black coffee with a pinch of sugar every single time I ask her, "Do you want something else with your coffee?" and every time she gives the same answer: "No, thank you, I just ate"

She never speaks, never smiles; she just sits and stares at the empty chair in front of her.

An hour, that's how long she stays. This morning is no different.

At a quarter past eight, a gentle ring from the door was heard by the workers at the Saint Clarice Cafe. A woman in a ruby coat stepped inside. She neither smiled nor waved as she passed several tables, making her way to the same booth...the one from the day before and the one before that, and so on and so on.

I approached her while smiling, but she would only stare blankly at me.

"What can I get you"

"A black coffee, with a pinch of sugar, please".

Later, as I arrived with her coffee, I noticed a picture on the table of a woman with blonde hair and hazel eyes smiling at the camera; she looked to be in her early twenties. The woman in the red coat doesn't notice me. I take note of her eyes; they look distant, as if trapped in another lifetime. She is also young, maybe in her late to early twenties.

I placed the coffee in front of her, but she ignored me. It was as if staring off into the distance was her curse. She couldn't keep her eyes away from the chair, not even when a man stumbled with a chair and dropped his coffee. Not when an older woman laughed at her husband's antiques, and not when three teenagers entered the cafe loudly discussing their coffee orders.

She just stares and stares. For hours on end.

My coworkers can't seem to understand my fascination with this woman, they think she is just a lady with issues...but she seems like so much more. I often find myself thinking of who she could be or who she once was. A woman with passion and love for art, who lost everything after her studio burned, a singer who lost her voice or a writer whose manuscript was stolen by a prominent thief. She could be everyone and no one.

She is the red woman and yet she resembles a blank piece of paper so much more. Or at least I remember she used to. One morning she appeared at a quarter past eight wearing nothing but a blue sweater and a plaid skirt, no coat this time. I brought her coffee, like every morning, but this time it was not the red woman that greeted me but a shell of her. I stared and stared and for the first time since I met her she addressed me, not as her server, but as a human, a companion in life. She smiled and said, "What is love but a life worth living".

I was so shocked that I couldn't say anything back, I simply stared and to my surprise for the first time in months she smiled, but for some reason I knew she wasn't smiling at me.

"Have you ever been in love?" She asked me once if I failed to say something back.

"No...no I have not"

She released a quiet breath and turned back towards the chair in front of her. "How tragic. For a life without love is simply existing" I stared at her...amazed by her, of the contrast in her eyes and her words, for one was alive while the other was an echo of what used to be.

"Is existing not good enough?" Her eyes shone with pity, as if what I had just said was the stupidest thing she ever heard. "Existing is peaceful...living is everything but," she pulled her wallet out and took some money out "and yet it's the only thing that ever feels real."

She stood up, "Thank you for the coffees" and before I could say anything more, she walked towards the door and the soft chime followed her out.

For the next couple of weeks I waited for her to come in but she never did.

On Thursday August 18th, 1981, the familiar chime was heard again but this time rang again, but this time it wasn't the red woman but a woman with golden hair and piercing eyes, she was wearing a navy-blue coat and was carrying a bouquet of flowers. I watched her walk to the back of the cafe, to the booth farthest away from the windows and sit in the opposite chair from where the red woman used to sit.

"What can I get you?" I asked, smiling at the woman.

She smiled back and without missing a beat she said, "A black coffee with a pinch of sugar please"

I nodded and turned to get her coffee, my hand unsteady for a reason I couldn't explain. When I returned, she hadn't touched anything at the table. Not the menu. Not the sugar.

"She used to sit here, didn't she?" she asked softly.

I froze. I knew who she was talking about.

"...Yes."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"She was always early," she said. "I was always late."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

She brought the coffee to her lips and almost as if she was whispering to herself she said,

"I hope she stopped waiting"

I turned around and walked back to the counter, the blonde woman stared and stared at the empty space in front of her. And I stared at her.

Once her cup was empty, she stood up, left the flowers on the table...and left without looking back.

I didn't move the flowers, I couldn't, not when I knew that someday the red woman would be back.

And for once, she wouldn't be the one waiting.

